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CLOVER BEND FARMS

Reserve

By Richard and Louise McCue

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Social-minded Alice French, whose popular stories of five decades ago caught the mystery and color of Arkansas canebrakes, would heartily approve the use now being made of her beloved Lawrence County plantation. Should she drive in her carriage along the roads and lanes that once were so familiar to her, she would find neat farm homes instead of huts, clean fields and strong fences where once there stood swamp water and thickets. She would see the striking results of three years of planning and hard work on the part of farm families cooperating with the Farm Security Administration.

Miss French, who wrote under the pen name Octave Thanet, probably would open her eyes very wide, for the FSA's program tackles social problems far more vigorously than methods which prevailed in her day. Yet the same underlying concern for humanity that today fosters a movement to help deserving families buy their own farms motivated Alice French's interest 50 years ago in the welfare of the people about her at Clover Bend, site of her Arkansas home and 82 FSA farmsteads.

The Clover Bend project was shaped from a 5,600-acre tract along the Black River, bought in 1937 by the Resettlement Administration, predecessor of FSA. The sandy, moderately fertile area lies on the east side of the river 11 miles southwest of Walnut Ridge. All of the families on the tract have lived at Clover Bend or nearby all their lives, and consequently they understand the eccentricities of Lawrence County soil. This has meant unusually rapid progress for the project as a whole, and has given Clover Bend a distinct advantage over FSA communities where families from the hills have had to re-establish themselves in the Delta.

Under the FSA long-time loan plan, each farmer is buying about 45 acres, most of it cleared, a four-room or five-room house, large barn, poultry house and other outbuildings. He meets his annual payments, which come to about \$200 and include interest, insurance and taxes, with an income, on the average, from seven bales of cotton, cream sales averaging \$4 and up a week, two dozen crates of sweet potatoes and sale of a calf, poultry and several hogs. If he were renting a 45-acre unit in the vicinity of Clover Bend, he would pay about \$6 an acre yearly, or an annual rental of well over \$200.

The average Clover Bend farm wife comes to the end of a crop year with a pantry full of hundreds of quarts of tomatoes, carrots, beans, peaches, pears, plums and even beef and pork, not to mention a smoke-house in whose dim interior swing several oversize hams. Feed bills at

Clover Bend are negligible because every spring the wide, flat fields are green with young pasture grass and hay. Under the thoughtfully conceived crop diversification program of the FSA, farmers have sown clover generously to build up the land, as well as furnish feed, because some of the fields have borne cotton for 30 years and haven't much fertility left.

If you knew nothing at all about the Clover Bend farmers' live-at-home program or their scientific land-use practices, you could tell from the appearance of their farms alone that here are unusually enterprising families. The positive example set by well-painted cottages in their setting of smooth, clipped lawns and flower beds has spurred a beautifying movement among other rural householders in the vicinity.

An important part of the Clover Bend plan is the restoration of Alice French's plantation home. The house stood near the point where the Black River seems to outline a clover leaf. This odd geographical quirk had given the name Clover Bend to a community established at the same spot in the early 1800's by a Frenchman named Pierre Le Mieux. In the days before drainage ditches, the hillock upon which Clover Bend rested was virtually the only desirable place in the neighborhood for a settlement on the east side of the river, because much of the area was swamp land.

Remote as the settlement was, it clung to existence, and in 1829 steamboats were finding their way to its landing. By 1850 Clover Bend had become a firmly established community, and a few years later, from 1869 until 1870, the town acquired a new dignity as county seat of Lawrence County. In 1877 Capt. F. W. Tucker, leader in the community for 40 years, bought most of the land now included in the FSA units, and in time set up a store, gin, grist mill and saw mill.

It was Captain Tucker and a Mrs. Crawford who brought Alice French to Arkansas. At the invitation of these two residents, the young Massachusetts-born writer, who had emerged from her "finishing school" education and travels in Europe with a bent for English social history, French literature and German philosophy, came to Clover Bend for a visit. She was entranced with the quiet and beauty of the spot and the wealth of legend to be found in Arkansas. For 30 years thereafter, until 1919, she spent her winters at Clover Bend, foraging deep into the community life about her for stories and characters to fit into her romances.

Even up to the time of her death in 1934, at the age of 83, she retained an interest in Arkansas life. In a biographical sketch, Josiah H. Shinn quotes an apostrophe to the State written by Miss French, as follows:

"Arkansas has an ideal climate, a grandiose and enchanting landscape, the kindest of soils; yet in none of these lies her subtlest charm. About her is a curious half-human pathos; those unimaginably rich mountain ranges, sullenly guarding a world's store of metals, those

mysterious forests hardly tapped by the lumberman's axe, those neglected, untilled fields that yield luxuriantly even to the most careless culture--how all these seem to half mock, half mourn the deadly swamps, the miry roadways, the forlorn cabins that are too frequent amid her prosperous farms!

"But the swamps are as beautiful as deadly; and the cabin dwellers have certain luxuries of sweet air and sunshine and space *** They are the most hospitable, most generous people in the world. I am glad to think that they are my own people, by choice if not by birth."

For a time her winter home was the cottage of Mrs. Crawford. But in 1895 fire destroyed this house, and the following year Miss French and Mrs. Crawford bought a tract nearby and built a 15-room, three-story house.

It must have been a very grand sort of a house, especially for Clover Bend in the 1890's. It stood on a curve of the river, towering above clumps of cedar and oak that softened the conventionality of its architectural design and contrasted pleasantly with its white columns and walls. Shrubs imported from England went into the landscaping of the estate. Stables to the rear housed fine horses and an elegant carriage. Building materials came up the river by boat. The floors were brightly polished hardwood, and Miss French made every stevedore remove his shoes before stepping into the house with a load of furniture.

Setting up a salon had its hazardous moments. The most nerve-wracking incident of moving day was when a team of mules failed to negotiate the steep bank leading up from the river and Miss French's massive grand piano slipped back on the boat from which it was being unloaded. Luckily the ropes held fast, otherwise the Black River gar might have known strange new company. Not until two more mules were harnessed to the wagon was it possible to get the heavy piano up to the house.

Miss French chose the top floor for her study. From a window she could follow the winding Black River as it flowed swiftly from the west, swept around the bend, and turned off again westward. She and Mrs. Crawford called their home "Thanford", a combination of Crawford and Miss French's pen name.

When the government bought its Clover Bend acreage it began the task of rebuilding "Thanford", which, by 1937, had not only fallen into deterioration, but stood dangerously close to the encroaching Black River. The building was first moved several hundred feet to a safer location and then strengthened and thoroughly renovated. Miss French's huge parlor is now a community recreation room, and the rest of the house is used as a residence by project personnel. A framed photograph of Miss French hangs above the fireplace in the parlor.

Activities of the FSA have served to perpetuate the same laudable tendency toward cultivating people as individuals that Alice French

manifested in her writings. Miss French adhered to the local color school of American literature that sprang up in the latter part of the last century, and whose followers painted half realistically, half romantically the Western frontier and the reconstructed South. Other local colorists included some of America's greatest storytellers--Bret Harte, Mark Twain, George Washington Cable, Hamlin Garland and Joel Chandler Harris.

A predominant characteristic of the local color school was its discovery of the common man. Miss French portrayed sympathetically characters from all walks of life. She was as realistic and understanding in her delineation of squatters, trappers, field laborers and Negroes as of the plantation aristocrats.

"We All", probably her best known work, is a study of rural Arkansas, and "By Inheritance" concerns itself with the Negro problem. Other Arkansas books include "Expiation", "Otto the Knight", "A Book of True Lovers", "Knitters in the Sun" and "Whitson Harp, Regulator", the latter being a story of a Ku Klux Klan-like organization in Arkansas organized to put down lawlessness. Nearly all these books were published between 1890 and 1910. From one-third to one-half of her literary production, Miss French has estimated, originated in the quietly stimulating environment of her Clover Bend home.

Today life in Clover Bend revolves around the project community center, where there are facilities for grammar school and high school classes, church services and club meetings. Also at the center are cotton gin, sweet potato storage house and space for constructing other buildings as they are needed. The community center in Miss French's time was a little white church with a belfry, built for the people by the author. It still stands near the edge of the FSA tract with its back to a cypress slough.

Here Miss French organized and taught Sunday School classes and started a school. At Christmas she entertained Clover Bend children with a gay party, climaxed with gifts of fruits, nuts and candy distributed from beneath a candle-lit cedar tree. Once she and a guest from Paris, France, visited schools in the neighborhood and gave dolls, made by Miss French herself, to the children.

Miss French undoubtedly would have approved of school athletics at Clover Bend today, for 50 years ago she demonstrated her interest in such pursuits by organizing a community baseball team and outfitting it with uniforms.

The well-equipped home economics and vocational education departments of the Clover Bend school would have seemed novel, indeed, in Miss French's day, but their enormous practicality would have appealed to her. Classes in every phase of homemaking are conducted in the home economics cottage by Miss Alice Dale Holloway. A vocational education building houses a handicrafts shop and class rooms; classes are taught by Weldon Elliot.

As in every neighborhood, the school is unifying influence, and at Clover Bend it has helped to break down any artificial wall that might otherwise be raised around an FSA community. Only about one-third of the school children are from FSA farms, the remainder coming from homes within a radius of from four to six miles. Two large buses make two runs each morning and evening to transport pupils.

Miss French's belief in full cooperation between individuals, groups and classes in solving social problems presumably would have led her to give whole-hearted support to the Clover Bend medical cooperative. Farmers belonging to this organization pay \$12 annually plus \$1 for each member of the family and receive whatever doctor's care and hospitalization they may need for a year with no additional cost.

A grist mill, mowing machine and other farm equipment are owned co-operatively by the community, to be used by any member. Farm supplies are purchased and crops marketed cooperatively, and the Clover Bend cotton gin is operated on a cooperative basis. Thirty families use electricity supplied by the local Rural Electrification Administration co-op, and the project as a whole owns a bull and a jack which may be borrowed by the FSA farmers for the improvement of farm cattle and working stock.

Thus, not only do the people "have certain luxuries of sweet air and sunshine and space," for which city folks well might envy them, but, by working together under wise direction, they are able to increase their material wealth. Had Alice French foreseen the potential effectiveness of modern sociological planning of this sort, she might have said that in cooperation and leadership, as well as in the "unimaginably rich mountain ranges", lies hope of a people.

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